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Moving from the playing field and into the dugout: Exploring the contributions of the 2013 DSEP
conference to our understanding of the psychology and sport coaching relationship

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Introduction

The coaching process is consistently described as complex (e.g. Fletcher & Scott, 2010). Indeed, the fluid and dynamic environments in which coaches often operate, contributes to the difficulty in defining the exact nature of what effective coaching is (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). Whilst it is typically an endeavour associated with achieving a set of goals, more recently there has been increasing acknowledgment of understanding coaching from a social perspective (Jones, 2011). Indeed, the complex nature of the social interactions involved, often across a diverse range of environments, means it is not a role to which a predictable set of rules or procedures can be prescribed (Cushion *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, utilising these assumptions about coaching in this way may have limited our potential for a) thoroughly understanding coaching and b) guiding practitioners (Jones & Wallace, 2006). Given the many demands often associated with coaching positions, coaching might be best described as a process of ‘orchestration’ by which coaches are required to steer the complex interactions and ambiguous environments in which they operate (Jones & Wallace, 2006).

Despite a recent surge of academic interest in coaching, Jones (2006) suggests it remains an “ill defined” and “under-theorised” field with no real guiding conceptual framework as to the complexity of the coaching process (p.3). Whilst various models of coaching practice have been offered from several different theoretical perspectives (e.g. leadership, motivation), the focus of these models on one specific aspect of coaching limits the extent to which we can understand the process as a whole (Cote & Gilbert, 2009).

The importance of psychology in, and for sport coaching has been addressed by a number of different areas of research including those focussing on leadership styles (e.g. Chelladurai, 1984), creating positive learning environments (e.g. Ames, 1992) and relationships in sport (e.g. Jowett, 2005) to name a few. The purpose of the present paper is not to provide a comprehensive review of the contribution of psychology to sport coaching literature, but

instead, to explore some of the relevant bodies of research that contribute to the main themes of the conference (psychology of performance; psychology for health and wellbeing and professional training) whilst also reflecting upon the ways the conference has contributed to our understanding of these themes from a coaching perspective.

Theme 1: Psychology for performance

Despite the multifaceted nature of many modern coaching roles, improving the performance of athletes might still be considered as a primary function of the coaching process (Lyle, 2002). Indeed, coaches themselves have identified a number of ways in which they feel they affect the performance of their athletes during competition. As part of a large scale project examining the success and failures at the Atlanta and Nagano Olympic Games, Gould *et al.* (2002) interviewed coaches to examine the features they perceived to be related to levels of success. In addition to a number of external features, coaches reflected on their role in the competition process, identifying a number of factors under their influence including athlete's confidence, plans for dealing with distractions, and levels of team cohesion. In addition to playing a role in objective performance outcomes, the degree to which a coach improves an athlete's performance may also be an important determinant of the way in which coaches are perceived. Coussens *et al.* (2013) at the conference highlighted the role of performance improvement in determining the extent to which soccer players perceive coaches to be supportive. They concluded that whilst players tend to disagree on the coaches they perceive to be the most supportive, these unique preferences can be related to self-confidence and improved performance.

Whilst the role coaches play in improving athlete performance is integral, the performance of the coach has received relatively less attention. Despite the acknowledgement that coaches should be considered as performers in their own right (Gould *et al.*, 2002; Thelwell *et al.*,

2008b), relatively few studies address the needs and skills that might impact upon coaching performance and the methods by which they might be met or improved.

Providing some evidence in this regard, Gould *et al.* (2002) in their examination of factors that influenced performance at the Nagano and Atlanta games mentioned above, also asked coaches also identify factors that influenced their performance as coaches in the year leading up to competition, 90 days before competition and at the games. They found that whilst coaches reflected on a number of external constraints (externally imposed rules and regulations) and benefits (support from NGB's), coaches also highlighted a number of controllable aspects that contributed to their performance, particularly at the games. This included making use of the high performance coaching facilities, being able to deal effectively and decisively with conflicts that arose and interacting with sport psychology consultants. Specifically, coaches suggested that in addition to athletes working with sport psychologists prior to the games, being able to engage with sport psychologists themselves was important for their own performance. Gould *et al.* (2002) concluded that in order to successfully manage the stress and pressure of competition, like athletes, coaches would benefit from engaging in mental skills training.

Addressing this, several studies have sought to determine the psychological skills utilised by coaches. Using interviews based around 4 key psychological skills (imagery, self-talk, relaxation and goal setting) with 13 professional coaches, Thelwell *et al.* (2008a) found that all coaches employed some psychological skills use. Though they displayed a preference for self-talk and imagery, generally skills were used for a number of different purposes and at a number of different times and locations. Coaches have also been found to engage in routines both before and after competition that utilise psychological skills, such as mentally rehearsing the game plan, or engaging in certain activities to maintain their focus (Bloom *et al.*, 1997).

Furthermore, there might be a number of parallels between the psychological skills required by athletes and coaches for performance. Drawing from work examining self-efficacy in athletes, Feltz *et al.* (1999) suggested it is important to understand the sources from which coaches might attain ‘coaching efficacy’ which they describe as “ the extent to which coaches believe they have the capacity to affect the learning and performance of their athletes” (p.765). Conceptualizing a multidimensional model, Feltz and colleagues proposed coaching efficacy consists of four main dimensions; game strategy efficacy (belief in ability to coach during competition); motivation efficacy (belief in ability to effect the psychological skills and states of one’s athletes); technique efficacy (belief in ability to instruct skills and diagnose problems), and character building efficacy (belief in ability to influence a positive attitude towards sports and good sportsmanship). In turn, these dimensions are influenced by the extent of coaching experience/preparation, prior success, perceived skill of athletes and school/community support. More recent work to extend this model suggests that these sources might benefit from containing a greater level of specificity. Using interviews with the same pool of participants from phase two of the Feltz *et al.* (1999) study, Chase *et al.* (2005) suggest that extent of coaching experience/preparation could be further broken down into aspects such as knowledge to prepare the team, past experience in coaching, leadership skills and coaches development.

Research examining coaching efficacy has demonstrated that years of coaching experience is strongly related to coaching efficacy (Feltz *et al.*, 1999; Lee *et al.*, 2002) and that this can be increased by engaging in coaching training programmes (Malete & Feltz, 2000; Lee *et al.* 2002). Evidence suggests that coaching efficacy impacts upon coaching behaviours and team satisfaction, and that these relationships can be mediated by gender (Myers *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, there may also be some differences in the way these sources of coaching efficacy are used by male and female coaches (Myers *et al.*, 2005) supporting previous work

showing that some sources of efficacy information might be unique to female coaches (Barber, 1999).

Taken together these areas of research related to coaching performance highlight several important things. Firstly, that coaches are aware of the ways in which they influence their own athletes' performances and are also aware of the factors that influence their performances as coaches. Secondly, coaching efficacy can derive from a number of different sources and can impact performance by influencing coaching behaviour and satisfaction of athletes. Moreover, individual differences (in this instance gender) might mediate these processes. Drawing upon this individual difference theme, coaching performance was most directly addressed at the conference by Bailey and Irwing (2013) who sought to explore whether or not coaching performance could be predicted by personality variables. Using a range of subjective (self-rated job performance) and objective measures (coaching level, salary and promotions), they examined the impact of 13 personality facets. They found that whilst there was no relationship between objective measures and personality, 'self-efficacy' and 'adventurousness' accounted for 29% of the variance in self-rated job performance, suggesting some preliminary support for the role of personality and individual differences in coaching job performance.

Theme 2: Psychology for Health and Wellbeing

The role of coaches in supporting the health and wellbeing of the participants they coach has received an increasing amount of attention (Cote *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, more emphasis has been placed on the value of coaching holistically, even if this has subject to more of an abstract analysis than actual support (Cassidy *et al.*, 2004). This more humanistic approach to coaching practice, with its emphasis on coaching the individual as a whole, has served as an important platform for work exploring the role of the coach in developing and promoting

health and wellbeing in athletes. Significant research in this area has focussed on the role of the coach in the creation of appropriate learning environments drawing upon the frameworks of achievement goal theory (c.f. Duda, 2007) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) which were both areas strongly represented at the conference.

One symposium designed to address this topic explored the research taking place as part of the European wide PAPA (Promoting Adolescent Physical Activity) project, designed to evaluate the impact of coach education programmes that encourage the development of more adaptive motivational climates for young people. In doing so, the team have developed a number of new measures, including the multidimensional coach created motivational climate scale (Appleton *et al.*, 2013) that draws upon both achievement goal theory and self-determination theory, and a multidimensional measure designed to capture children's well and ill being (Bracey *et al.*, 2013). Preliminary findings suggest some success of the intervention to date.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the meeting of psychological needs continues to be a strong theme in the creation of effective coaching climates, particularly in relation to the role of autonomy supportive and controlling coach behaviours. Taylor & Turner (2013) addressed the issue of controlling coaching behaviours by studying the impact of perceived coach controlling behaviours on immune function. By measuring saliva samples (more specifically secretory immunoglobulin A or sIgA), they were able to demonstrate that increases in perceptions of coaches psychological control and intentions to drop out of hockey were associated with increases in sIgA levels, which may be indicative of an immunological stress response. Addressing the role of both controlling and autonomy supportive behaviours, Healy *et al.* (2013) demonstrated that both behaviours are important for developing adaptive goal motivations and moreover both can independently predict indices of ill and well-being. In addition, mediating factors within these processes were also

175 explored. Examining the relationship between autonomy support and wellbeing, Cronin and
176 Allen (2013) demonstrated that personal and social skills may serve to mediate the
177 relationships between coach autonomy support, self-esteem and positive affect.

178 Several studies examined the role of coaching styles on issues surrounding health and
179 wellbeing. Shanmugam, *et al.* (2013) using a vignette scenario demonstrated that negative
180 coaching styles may impact upon athletes' vulnerability for eating pathology. Moreover, they
181 also demonstrated that gender may play a part in this, showing that females were likely to be
182 influenced by both male and female coaches, whereas males were influenced only by male
183 coaches. Specific coaching styles were also addressed in relation to the physical and
184 psychological effects they may promote in athletes. Curran (2013) explored the role of
185 conditional regard (guilt inducement, praise withdrawal) and structure (rules, limits, support
186 and feedback) on the youth soccer players' physical and psychological exhaustion. Using
187 questionnaires across the course of the season, they found that structure negatively predicts
188 exhaustion at low conditional regard, whereas structure positively predicts exhaustion at high
189 conditional regard. They concluded that when structure is perceived to be conditionally
190 regarding, higher exhaustion is likely in youth sport participants, and thus this should be
191 avoided. Building upon a well established body of work in coach-athlete relationships (cf.
192 Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007), Davis *et al.* (2013) explored the role of the coach-athlete
193 relationship in the wellbeing of young disabled athletes and found the quality of that
194 relationship is associated with athletes' emotional wellbeing.

195 Coaches may also have a significant role to play in supporting the health and wellbeing of
196 athletes when they are unable to compete. Cunliffe (2013) examined the role of coaches in
197 times of injury, specifically addressing athletes' perceptions of coach involvement in injury
198 rehabilitation. Themes emerging included the coaches' use of soft skills, communication and
199 trust, relationship dyads and athlete responsibilities. When coaches used empathy,

understanding and effective communication skills, this helped athletes maintain their motivation to rehabilitate.

Perhaps understandingly, when it comes to the role of the coach, much of the conference material was focused on the ability of the coach to develop or maintain the health and wellbeing of athletes, particularly youth athletes. However, the factors that impact upon the health and wellbeing of the coach have received relatively little attention. Research indicates that coaches experience a wide range of stressors (Frey, 2007; Levy *et al.*, 2009; Thelwell *et al.*, 2008b) and that these can manifest themselves through both psychological and physical symptoms, particularly in competition (Hudson *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, coach burnout has been identified as a significant issue for sport coaches (Fletcher & Scott, 2010). Whilst not exclusively about the health and wellbeing of the coach, one exception at the conference included research examining how coaching stressors might influence behaviour that impacts upon the coach athlete relationship. Specifically, Scholefield *et al.* (2013) highlighted that coaching stressors identified in interviews with 6 elite athletics coaches, included pressure, expectation, conflict, and coaching responsibilities. These were seen to have significant impact upon aspects of the coach athlete relationship, in negative ways (withdrawing from athletes, changes in communication and body language) and positive ways (increasing positivity and motivation).

Theme 3: Professional Training

Whilst the third conference theme focussed around the professional training of sport psychologists in particular, there are a number of pertinent themes within coaching literature that parallel some of the issues highlighted.

Increasingly it has been recognised that coaches learn how to coach in a number of different ways including formal, informal and self directed learning experiences and that this largely

appears to be an ad hoc blend of opportunities, highly dependent upon the individual (Cushion *et al.*, 2010; Irwin *et al.*, 2004). In fact, research indicates that coach education programmes can be limited in their impact on coach learning, and whilst coaches feel they satisfy needs in terms of delivering sport specific skills, they lack the ability to fulfil a number of other coaching needs, including education about sport psychology (Nash & Sproule, 2012).

Whilst the proliferation, and understanding, of sport psychology is likely to vary across different sport contexts, coaching knowledge and understanding of how to implement psychological skills into coaching activities, even in mass participation and lucrative sports like football, has been found to be somewhat limited (Pain & Harwood, 2004). With this in mind, coaches might benefit from increased education in this area to improve their practice. An example of such an educational approach utilised by Hardwood (2008) included hosting coaching workshops that both educated coaches in the important psychological features for performance and encouraged coaches to engage in discussion about how they might incorporate such skills into their coaching practice. At the conference, this body of work was represented by several presentations reflecting on the efficacy of coaching interventions designed to enhance the learning environment for young participants (Quested *et al.*, 2013) and to improve aspects of mental toughness in adolescent rowers (Mahoney *et al.*, 2013).

In addition to the psychological skills coaches may wish to develop in their athletes, the psychological skills possessed by coaches and how they learn these warrants further attention. Whilst some research has explored the use of psychological techniques (such as self-talk, imagery and pre-performance routines) in coaches (Bloom *et al.*, 1997; Thelwell *et al.*, 2008a), there is also a need to examine the role sport psychologists can play in the education of such skills. Giges *et al.* (2004) highlight that like athletes, coaches are often expected to perform in highly pressurised environments, often under a high degree of public

scrutiny. Moreover, their success can often be determined by factors outside of their direct control, such as how their athletes perform. They suggest that effective skills for coaches to develop include the development of self awareness in terms of their own needs, and help in the learning of strategies to overcome what they perceive as barriers to their own effective performance.

Although there appears to be a paucity of empirical literature addressing coach learning, the limited research in this area appears to indicate that experience and observation of other coaches tend to form the basis for much of coaching knowledge, yet it has also been recognised that coach education often fails to draw upon this knowledge (Cushion *et al.*, 2010). Drawing from educational work, Cushion and colleagues suggest that this knowledge could be enhanced by engaging in mentoring and critical reflection.

Reflective practice has been identified as purposeful way of developing critical self awareness and provides a useful mechanism through which coaches can monitor and improve their own practice (Gilbourne *et al.* 2013). Indeed, when drawing upon the learning experiences of elite coaches, Irwin *et al.* (2004) summarised that coaches have higher quality learning experiences when engaging with mentors that promote reflection. Despite a limited amount of domain specific reflective practice literature for coaching, it is clear that the concept of reflection has begun to permeate, becoming more visible in higher education coaching courses and National Governing Body qualifications (Cropley *et al.*, 2012), though many feel there is some way to go in this regard (Gilbourne *et al.*, 2013). Research establishing a diversity of methods in encouraging reflective practice appears to be promising. Carson (2008) suggests that the use of video in reflection can help inexperienced coaches better understanding their strengths and weaknesses that might be otherwise overlooked using traditional methods. In addition, Douglas & Carless (2008) highlight the potential value of using storytelling to stimulate reflective practice.

274 Discussions around reflective practice issues at the conference, though specifically related to
275 reflection in sport psychology, highlighted a number of pertinent issues that might be
276 important considerations for the coaching domain. For example, in examining the reflective
277 practice literature in sport psychology, Huntley *et al.* (2013) suggested there is a lack of
278 consensus of what reflective practice is. Moreover, they highlighted this body of research
279 appears to be lacking in methodological and cultural diversity, in that much of the research
280 takes place in the UK and is dominated by qualitative designs. Conference presentations also
281 highlighted issues surrounding the importance of developing a thorough understanding of the
282 principles underlying reflective practice (Cropley *et al.* 2013), the appreciation of contextual
283 features within reflection (Mellalieu, 2013) and the impact reflection might have not only on
284 practice, but also on theory development (Devonport & Lane, 2013).

285 The literature discussed in the context of this paper, whilst not comprehensive, reflects upon
286 the important relationships that exist between psychology and sport coaching, including
287 theoretical concepts and practical application. Though some of these areas might be best
288 described as ‘seedlings’, the conference demonstrated that generally this is a body of
289 literature that is embracing the sunlight and beginning to blossom. Nevertheless, it appears
290 that there are some important areas of this relationship that warrant additional ‘watering’,
291 particularly in relation to the coach themselves. Whilst gaining the perceptions of athletes as
292 the end users of coaching is undoubtedly important, greater understanding of coaching
293 performance, health and wellbeing, and coach education might be further enhanced by
294 shifting this perspective from the playing field and into the coaches’ dugout.

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